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Death as a Way of Life: The Increasing Resort to Homicide in a Maya Indian Community[1]

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The breaking down of a social-control system based on belief in the guardianship of the spiritual ancestors and their temporal agents, the curers, is reflected in a rising homicide rate as people turn to individual sanctions when threatened. The acts of homicide differ in their social significance according to who is killed, the context, the agency, and the motivation of the killer. Thirty-seven homicides between 1938 and 1965, analyzed in terms of these component variables, reflect the conflicts arising from competition in new economic enterprises, the rising suspicion of curers' abuse of their supernatural power, and the loss of belief in the guardianship of the ancestors.

THE social impact of homicide has caused some analysts[2] to treat it and its supposed inverted complement, suicide, as one kind of behavior with a single meaning, ignoring Durkheim's caveat that behavioral rubrics categorize diverse phenomena. Here I shall analyze the variety of strategies involved in killing in a Mexican community, which I shall call Teklum (the Tzeltal term for village), and endeavor to show how rules of behavior are expressed in killing and in attempts to avoid being killed. Further, I shall endeavor to point out what these indicate about structural and organizational changes both within the community and in its relations with the wider society. Since suicide is absent, except for a single case of a madman, I have restricted my enquiry to homicide.

Teklum is a predominantly Indian township of Mexico. The population of the town center—about 1,900—includes only one Ladino, or non-Indian, family, that of the schoolteacher. The sense of community is limited to people living in the center and in the four nearby hamlets (*barrios*).

The town center is divided physically and socially into two endogamous sections, called "upper" and "lower." The outlying hamlets are linked to the nearest section by social and economic ties. The civil and religious posts of the town are, in local theory, apportioned evenly between the sections. This was in fact true until the 1950's; for each of the ranked posts had a paired complement, so that both sides of the dual division were represented, and the single posts of president and *síndico* (the president's administrative assistant) were al-

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leaders, both in the civil authority and in the curing profession. The transition from the old hierarchy of control to the new leadership structure is still in process. In the most recent confrontation of the civil authority and curers, the fact that neither side resorted to violence suggests the transitional nature of homicide as a solution in intracommunal conflict.

This study of homicide indicates that the changing rate of behavior points to structural change, but does not in itself indicate what kind of change occurs or from what motives it stems. Qualitative case analysis related to structural changes within the recall of informants is essential for understanding social process.

NOTES

[1] Field work is based on two periods of residence in the community in 1964 and 1965; it was supported by the National Institute of Mental Health. I am grateful for comments by Paul Friedrich, Richard Henderson, Harold Scheffler, and Peter Wilson, who have improved the original version read at the 1965 meetings of the American Anthropological Association. I remain responsible for the contents of the paper.

[2] Henry and Short (1954:18) analyze both suicide and homicide as undifferentiated aggressive reactions to frustration, the rates of which vary—in the first case inversely and in the second case directly—with the strength of the external control system over behavior. Their assumption that homicide is motivationally a single phenomenon, and not an expression of a variety of motives, stems from the assumption that all cases of aggressive acts are the result of frustration. Straus and Straus (1964:587) apply a similar correlational analysis of homicide and suicide rates with structural features of society in Ceylon, but come to opposite conclusions. They maintain that one would expect greater evidence of homicide in a "loosely structured society," by which they mean one with considerable sanctioning of variation in individual behavior. These studies contradict each other in the conclusions that they reach by similar analytical processes, but they are attempts to move away from such psychoanalytic reasoning as the death-wish theory.

[3] Bohannan's (1960) survey of homicide and suicide in African societies represents a useful model for comparing the total pattern of homicide cross-culturally. In presenting the case material here, I have used a similar format, adding to it the circumstances surrounding the killing. In the analysis of these materials, I have diverged from Bohannan's model in trying to demonstrate the linkage among the components—the ratios, to use Burke's (1945) terminology of scene/setting/actor/agent.

[4] The term "witch" is a translation of the Tzeltal term *ʔah'-Zamal*, literally "giver of sickness." The term "curer" is a translation of *ʔuʔul*. The power to cure and to give sickness stems from the possession of a *swayohel*, or animal spirit.

[5] For a discussion of the tactics of gaining consensus in witch-killings, see Manning Nash (1960).

[6] Political homicide by agrarian leaders, which is so frequent in the central plateau (Friedrich 1962), is a relatively recent phenomenon in the retreat zones of Indian population. The cases analyzed by Friedrich are a strategy of political power stemming from a revolutionary background, and the cultural assumptions to which he points contrast with those underlying witch-killings. My only comparable case is, significantly, found outside the traditional center, in the new ejido colony.

[7] Jules Henry (1936) sees the formula of fear and anger as the

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programs in the interest of "civilizing" the Indians. This formulation involved a basic contradiction between the goal of moving into regional and national networks and that of keeping the old autonomy and independence of the corporate community. He never had to face that contradiction. Unable to gain adherents other than the small group of profit-sharers in the cooperative he organized, he was killed by opponents within the community.

The Family and Household

The core of the traditional culture lay in the local power hierarchies patterned on the familial model of age-ordered paternal authority institutionalized in the me?iltatil. The me?iltatil of the household have provided a flexible institution for adjusting conflict within the kin group. Their role in directing ritual performances preserves a sense of continuity in life cycle changes.

The institutionalized authority of the elders has not been upset by the trend toward residence based on nuclear families, which is an adjustment to the pressure of limited space in the town center. Kinship ties are continually reinforced by rituals that draw together the me?iltalil as sponsors of ceremonies marking baptism, marriage, and death. This group of sponsoring relatives has absorbed the institution of compadrazgo, adding compadres to the network of affinally-and bilaterally-related kin. The procedures for adjusting conflict among members of the household and extended family networks reinforce the authority of the elders. When adjustive processes in the house and court "arrangements" and in curing ceremonies fail, the only recourse is for one of the disputants to leave the community or commit homicide.

Ceremonies within the household provide a model for the rules of the game that apply to adjustive behavior in the community. The household officials introduce new officials into their role, teaching them the prayers and directing the proceedings. Their authority depends upon age and prestige acquired in office. The me?iltatil, as the elders of the family, are the direct link with the ancestors. They and the nakawane provide the strongest force for preserving the ways of the ancestors.